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# Bridging in Social Media Feeds Censors Controversial Topics

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## Abstract

Under many implementations of bridging-based ranking — an approach to conflict-sensitive ranking that has been used on social media and for AI alignment — items are ranked highly if they are valued by people who would normally disagree. Here, we explore the effects of bridging-based ranking in an extensive dataset of 70 million URLs shared on Facebook, and show that while a naive implementation of bridging can lead to higher domain quality among the top-ranked URLs, it can also downrank URLs that relate to controversial topics. These findings suggest that when ranking across many topics, bridging may need to be implemented in a topic-aware way if preserving representation across topics is desired.

## 1 Introduction

Motivated by concerns about how algorithms (such as recommender systems) might exacerbate conflict and polarization between groups [Stray et al., 2023], *bridging systems* are a recent proposal to design algorithms that help “increase mutual understanding and trust across divides, creating space for productive conflict, deliberation, or cooperation” [Ovadya and Thorburn, 2023]. The term “bridging” is used loosely to refer to many distinct approaches consistent with this qualitative goal. However, in a ranking or selection setting, it is often used to mean upranking or selecting items that are predicted to be more “bridging”.

Many of the most prominent examples rely on a particular measure of bridging, “diverse approval,” where an item is considered to be bridging if it is predicted to be valued by a groups who would normally disagree with each other. This approach has been implemented in Community Notes, a feature for crowdsourced fact-checking on the social media platform X [Wojcik et al., 2022], for comment ranking on Facebook [Meta, 2020, 2022], and in collective response systems [Ovadya, 2023] such as Remesh [Masood Alavi et al., 2022] and Polis [Small et al., 2021] which are used, often by governments, to elicit the opinions of a collective at scale. Notably, it has also been used in AI alignment and governance settings, to inform policy at OpenAI [Konya et al., 2023a] and as part of a method for “Collective Constitutional AI” alignment trialed by Anthropic [Huang et al., 2024].

In most of these deployments, bridging-based ranking (BBR) is performed within a narrow domain, where the items being ranked or selected are about a single topic. For example, the X Community Notes algorithm selects up to one note to show out of the set of fact-check notes proposed about a particular post, and is thus, effectively constrained to selections about the same topic (i.e. that post). However, there is increasing interest in using bridging-based ranking in more open domains, including for open-ended AI alignment or policymaking [Konya et al., 2023b, Sorensen et al., 2024] and in the main feeds on social media platforms [Törnberg et al., 2023, Stray, 2024, Burton et al., 2024, Sparkable, 2024].

url_id	url	title	blurb	tpfc_rating	age	gender	pol	likes	...
1	y.com/a	Title 1	Blurb 1	false	25-34	F	-2	124	...
2	z.com/b	Title 2	Blurb 2	null	35-44	M	1	26	...
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮

Table 1: Example of the Facebook URLs data [Messing et al., 2020]. For each URL, we have aggregate engagement counts (‘likes’, ‘loves’, ‘views’, etc) by demographic groups defined by age, gender, and political leaning (‘pol’). For some URLs, we also have whether the URL was fact-checked as true or false by third-party fact checkers (‘tpfc\_rating’).

There is limited evidence about the advantages and drawbacks of bridging in open domains. A key concern in these domains is that bridging-based ranking might not only alter the distribution of items but also the range of topics covered, possibly leading to the suppression of controversial topics in the process of selecting bridging content. We empirically investigate the effects of bridging in an open domain environment—social media feed ranking—by utilizing a large dataset of about 70 million URLs shared on Facebook along with group-wise engagement counts [Messing et al., 2020]. We find that BBR (based on diverse approval) leads to higher domain quality among the top-ranked URLs. However, it also downranks URLs that relate to controversial topics such as January 6th and the 2020 US presidential election. These results suggest that while BBR may afford benefits like improving informational quality, open domains also introduce a new challenge: the need to implement bridging in a topic-aware way when representativeness across topics is desired.

## 2 Method

We examine the impact of engagement- and bridging-based ranking using a comprehensive dataset released by Facebook [Messing et al., 2020] and the academic organization Social Science One. The dataset includes all Facebook URLs shared publicly at least 100 times along with engagement counts aggregated by demographic groups (with noise added for differential privacy) between 2017-2022. Demographic groups are based on age, gender, and political affinity.<sup>1</sup> For example, the dataset might indicate that 143 left-leaning female users aged 18-25 liked posts with a particular URL. The dataset has more than 3 trillion rows; Table 1 provides a visual representation of the rows. For further details, please refer to Messing et al. [2020].

In engagement-based ranking, items are ranked according to the probability that the user will like the item. In bridging based-ranking, items are typically ranked on the basis of *diverse approval*, i.e., items that are liked by diverse users are ranked higher. This approach typically involves assigning users to groups, and aggregating engagement predictions across groups. A simple and common instantiation is to take the minimum of engagement predictions across groups [Konya et al., 2023a].

Previous studies have primarily focused on bridging political groups, such as left- and right-leaning users [Burton et al., 2024, Wojcik et al., 2022]. Here, too, we examine the effects of bridging across political divides. In particular, for each URL  $x$ , we estimate the probability  $p(\text{like} \mid g, x)$  that a user with political leaning  $g$  (either `left` or `right`) will like  $x$ . In the engagement-based ranking, the items for a user with leaning  $g$  are scored by  $p(\text{like} \mid g, x)$ . In the bridging-based ranking, each item is scored as  $\min_{g \in \{\text{left}, \text{right}\}} p(\text{like} \mid g, x)$ . The engagement-based ranking is personalized based solely on users’ political leanings while the bridging-based ranking is uniform for all users. Although in practice, timelines would be personalized on more comprehensive data (even with bridging-based ranking), we focus on this simplified scenario for illustration. In Appendix B, we describe in more detail how we estimate the probabilities used for ranking.

## 3 Results

We conduct our analysis using the most recent month of data in the Facebook URLs dataset, July 2022. Since the vast majority of URLs receive very few likes while a small fraction account for almost all the engagement, we apply a filter to include only URLs that received at least 50 likes from

<sup>1</sup>The Facebook URLs dataset also includes the country of the user, but in our analysis we focus only on the United States.

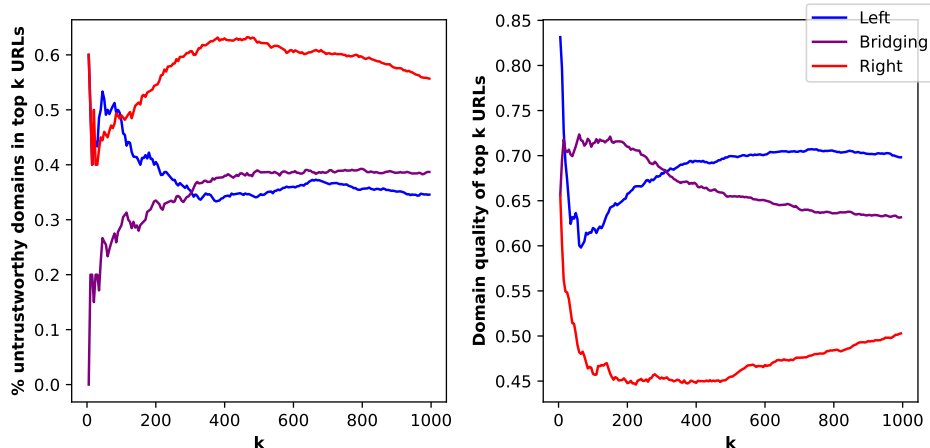


Figure 1: A comparison of the trustworthiness [González-Bailón et al., 2023] and quality [Lin et al., 2023] of the domains recommended by personalized ranking (to left- and right-leaning users) and by bridging-based ranking.

at least five demographic groups. This yields 37,312 URLs which account for 87% of all likes on URLs during that month. Furthermore, we filter to URLs that are found to be political based on a classifier we developed that uses the URL headlines and short share blurbs for political content classification (for details, see Appendix A). About 10% of URLs are found to be political, leaving us with a total of 3937 URLs to use for ranking.

### 3.1 Bridging improves domain quality

We evaluate whether bridging-based ranking can improve conversations online by choosing articles from higher-quality domains that are more factual and unbiased. We evaluate domains in two ways. First, we use a measure of domain untrustworthiness that was also used in the 2020 Facebook election studies [González-Bailón et al., 2023]. The measure labels a domain as being untrustworthy if at least two URLs from the domain have been fact-checked as being false by Facebook’s third-party fact-checking program. Second, we use a measure from [Lin et al., 2023] who develop a latent measure of domain quality which captures several manual, expert-curated measures that span different dimensions such as factualness, unbiasedness, transparency, etc.

Figure 1 shows that among the top 300 URLs, which represent about 8% of all possible URLs, rankings based on bridging promote more trustworthy and high-quality domains compared to *both* the left and right-leaning rankings. Overall, this suggests a favorable impact of bridging since the top-ranked items are most visible to users. However, it is also important to acknowledge that bridging may improve outcomes for one group while worsening outcomes for another. Beyond the top 300 URLs, bridging continues to improve the quality and trustworthiness of domains for right-leaning users but not left-leaning users. This discrepancy might occur because right-leaning users typically encounter content from lower-quality domains. Consequently, bridging between left and right-leaning users might also involve exposing left-leaning users to content from these lower-quality domains.

### 3.2 Bridging allocates less attention to controversial topics

We examine how the personalized and bridging-based ranking shift attention to and from controversial topics. In July 2022, some of the most widely-discussed topics were (1) the January 6th capitol riot because of former White House aide Cassidy Hutchison’s testimony on June 28th, 2022, (2) election integrity and the legitimacy of the 2020 US Presidential election, (3) abortion due to the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* on June 24th, 2022, (4) a Supreme Court justice who faced calls for resignation after certain revelations, and (5) calls to impeach the U.S. President.

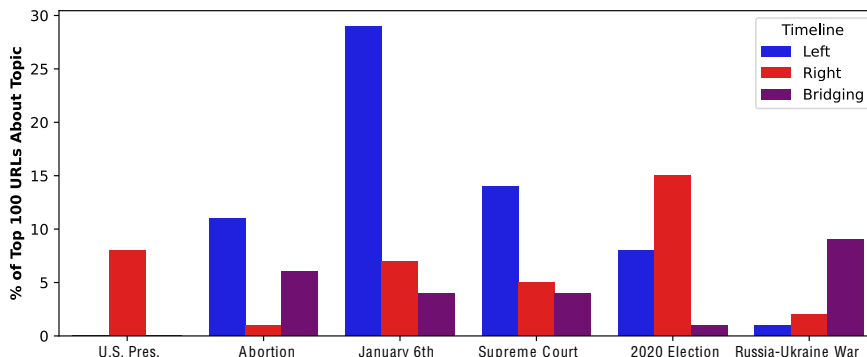


Figure 2: A comparison of the topics promoted in personalized ranking (to left-leaning and right-leaning users) and bridging-based ranking.

As shown in Figure 2, these five topics<sup>2</sup> account for 63% and 38% of the top 100 URLs in the timeline personalized to left- and right-leaning users, respectively, but only 24% in the bridging-based ranking. All five topics were recommended less frequently in the bridging-based ranking compared to both personalized rankings, with the exception of abortion. In comparison, the bridging-based ranking increased the visibility of discussions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a conflict that, in the United States, has bipartisan support for Ukraine. Articles about Russia-Ukraine made up 9% of the top 100 URLs in the bridging-based ranking, but only 1% and 2% of the left-leaning and right-leaning timelines, respectively. In Appendix C, we also provide a list of the top ten URLs under the personalized rankings and bridging-based rankings. Qualitative observation also indicates the tendency of the bridging-based ranking to choose URLs about less controversial subjects.

## 4 Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper, we explored the effects of bridging- and engagement-based ranking in the Social Science One dataset of URLs posted to Facebook, showing that while bridging does improve the domain quality of the top-ranked URLs, it can also reduce the visibility of controversial topics. As people increasingly experiment with bridging-based ranking in open domains (that is, ranking over inventories that are not constrained to a single topic), these findings point to trade-offs associated with bridging, and suggest that if representation across topics is important, it may be necessary to implement bridging in a topic-aware fashion.<sup>3</sup>

Our results raise a number of normative issues. First, how *should* attention be allocated across topics? We showed that bridging based on diverse approval can suppress visibility of controversial topics relative to engagement-based ranking, but we don’t claim that the allocation of attention to topics under engagement-based ranking is optimal. Second, if bridging were to be implemented in a topic-wise fashion, the method by which the set of topics is determined, and items classified as belonging to a given topic, would likely have a significant impact on which items are ranked highly, requiring editorial choices and semantic classifiers that complicate the pitch for bridging.

We emphasize that our results here are preliminary, and we intend to extend our evaluation with additional evaluation metrics, more sophisticated topic classification, and larger subsets of the Facebook URLs dataset. However, given current interest in bridging-based ranking and the use of bridging-related social choice mechanisms as inputs for AI alignment and governance, we think it is important to highlight the trade-offs associated with these approaches.

<sup>2</sup>The five topics were chosen by manually selecting the most popular topics in the top URLs in the three rankings. The topics were classified using keyword matches. In future work, we plan to have a more sophisticated topic taxonomy and classification.

<sup>3</sup>We note that the Community Notes algorithm on X—though it is used for ranking in a narrow domain, across notes responding to particular posts—also takes into account topics for a different reason, i.e., for better modeling multiple axes of conflict [X, 2024].

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## A Political classifier

We created a classifier that predicts whether a URL is about a political topic based on its headline and short share blurb. To construct a labeled dataset for training, we first identified the domains with the most URLs (while filtering to URLs that were most shared in the United States, rather than other countries). The top twenty domains are listed in Table 2. We then manually reviewed these domains to find political and non-political categories that were identifiable within the URL. For instance, a URL containing `nytimes.com/politics/` was classified as political, whereas a URL containing `nytimes.com/art/` was classified as non-political. Through this method of automated labeling using string matches within the domains, we compiled a dataset of 483,993 URLs, with 36% identified as political.

To create the classifier, we first embedded the headline and short share blurb associated with each URL using `all-mpnet-base-v2`, a state-of-the-art pre-trained sentence transformer [Reimers and Gurevych, 2019]. We then concatenated the embeddings together, and trained a logistic regression model on these concatenated embeddings to predict whether the content as political or not. The model was trained using an 80/20 split for training and testing, respectively, and it achieved 95% accuracy on the test set.

Domain	Count of URLs
youtube.com	2421974
cnn.com	142181
foxnews.com	126971
yahoo.com	124272
nytimes.com	121146
gofundme.com	117567
washingtonpost.com	101896
twitter.com	96040
giphy.com	89380
breitbart.com	85034
tenor.co	79390
amazon.com	78400
thehill.com	78075
msn.com	76520
dailymail.co.uk	71513
apple.news	64531
nbcnews.com	62322
patch.com	62293
tiktok.com	61385
businessinsider.com	57484

Table 2: The top twenty domains in the Facebook URLs dataset.

## B Estimating engagement probabilities

Our ranking algorithms (engagement- and bridging-based) rely on estimates of the probability  $p(\text{like} \mid x, g)$  that a user with political leaning  $g$  will like URL  $x$ . Below, we explain our methodology for estimating these probabilities.

The Facebook URLs includes the number of times that each demographic group has liked and viewed each URL (see Table 1 for a visual representation of the dataset). Demographics are defined by age, gender, and political leaning. For our analysis, we consider 2 gender groups (male, female), 7 age groups, and 4 possible political leanings (Far Left, Left, Right, Far Right), resulting in  $2 \times 7 \times 4 = 56$  total demographic groups. Let  $v_{ux}$  represent the number of times a demographic group  $u$  has viewed URL  $x$ ,  $y_{ux}$  be the number of times a group  $u$  has liked URL  $x$ , and  $\ell(u)$  be the political leaning (either left or right) of a group  $u$ .

Under normal circumstances, a straightforward estimate of the engagement probability  $p(\text{like} \mid x, g)$  would be the ratio  $\sum_{u:\ell(u)=g} y_{ux} / \sum_{u:\ell(u)=g} v_{ux}$  which is the total likes on URL  $x$  from users with

leaning  $g$  divided by the total views from users with leaning  $g$ . However, because of the differential privacy noise introduced into the dataset, it is possible for the total likes  $\sum_{u:\ell(u)=g} y_{ux}$  to be greater than the total number of views  $\sum_{u:\ell(u)=g} v_{ux}$ , or even for either values to be negative.

To accurately estimate engagement probabilities while considering the noise from differential privacy, we employ statistical methods from the field of errors-in-variables modeling [Fuller, 1987]. Specifically, we use Deming regression [Adcock, 1878, Kummell, 1879, Deming, 1943], a regression method that adjust for known Gaussian measurement errors in both the independent and dependent variables. This approach is particularly suitable for our analysis as Gaussian noise was deliberately added to the data to ensure differential privacy, and its parameters are known.

Specifically, we fit the following Deming regression model:

$$y_{ux} = \beta_{\ell(u),x} v_{ux}, \tag{1}$$

$$y_{ux} = \bar{y}_{ux} + \epsilon_{ux}^y, \tag{2}$$

$$v_{ux} = \bar{v}_{ux} + \epsilon_{ux}^v, \tag{3}$$

where  $\beta_{\ell(u),x}$  is the coefficient being estimated, the variables  $\bar{y}_{ux}$  and  $\bar{v}_{ux}$  represent the true, unobserved like and view counts (before Gaussian noise was added), and the variables  $\epsilon_{ux}^y \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_y^2)$  and  $\epsilon_{ux}^v \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_v^2)$  are independent Gaussian noise terms. The standard deviations of the noise added to the like and views counts in the Facebook URLs dataset are  $\sigma_y = 22$  and for views is  $\sigma_v = 2228$  [Messing et al., 2020].

In our model, the coefficient  $\beta_{\ell(u),x}$  is constrained to be within the range  $[0, 1]$ , and we interpret  $\beta_{\text{left},x}$  and  $\beta_{\text{right},x}$  as estimates of the engagement probabilities  $p(\text{like} \mid x, \text{left})$  and  $p(\text{like} \mid x, \text{right})$ .

## C Top URLs under personalized and bridging-based ranking



<b>Bridging-based Ranking</b>		
<b>Domain</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Share Blurb</b>
ukrinform.net	Slovakia planning to send MiG-29 fighter jets and tanks to Ukraine	Slovakia is planning to send MiG-29 fighter aircraft and tanks to Ukraine, whereas the Czech Republic will provide assistance to Slovakia in patrolling its territory until it receives U.S.-made F-16s instead of the aircraft transferred to Ukraine. — Ukrinform.
blacknews.com	Black Woman From Detroit Sworn in as a Judge By Her Dad Who is Also a Judge	Meet Rebekah Coleman, who was recently appointed as a judge in Michigan’s District Court, a moment that was made even more special because her father, who is also a judge, was the one who swore
atlantablackstar.com	‘I Don’t Care How Old’: 1955 Warrant for the White Woman Who Accused Emmett Till Found; Family Wants Her in Handcuffs	An arrest warrant for Carolyn Bryant Donham, the woman whose accusation spurred the killing of Emmett Till almost 67 years ago, has been recovered by
thehill.com	Newsom pardons woman who killed man who abused, trafficked her	California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) pardoned a woman on Friday who was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole after she killed a man when she was a teenager after he had trafficked her fo. . .
19fortyfive.com	Sweden: A Submarine Powerhouse for NATO (And Nightmare for Russia)	Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union had the largest fleet of submarines in the world, as well as the largest in world naval history. Today, the Russian Navy is a shell of its former self, but its submarines are still considered capable and that is a fact that has worried NATO leaders for years...
washingtonpost.com	Biden upgrades awards for four Vietnam War veterans to Medal of Honor	President Biden presents the Medal of Honor Tuesday to former Army Specialist 5 Dwight Birdwell for his actions Jan. 31, 1968, during the Vietnam War. (Evan Vucci/AP)President Biden awarded the nation’s highest recognition for valor in combat, the Medal of Honor, to four Vietnam War veterans on Mo...
countrymusicfamily.com	Dolly Parton Delivers Tribute To The Troops With ‘Ballad Of The Green Berets’	Parton has always been a huge supporter of our military, but her recording “Ballad Of The Green Berets” might just be her most patriotic move.
abcnews.go.com	93-year-old man shoots home intruder, fends off others near Los Angeles	A 93-year-old suburban Los Angeles homeowner, who a relative said was frustrated over being the victim of numerous home break-ins, shot and critically wounded a burglar.
opposingviews.com	California Prisoner Has Now Beaten 2 Child Molesters To Death With A Cane While In Jail	In the letter, Watson stated that hours before the attacks...
ijr.com	University That Employs Clarence Thomas Shuts Down Students’ Attempt To Remove Him From Teaching Position	A cancel culture effort to punish Justice Clarence Thomas by removing him from his teaching position has failed.

Table 3: The top ten URLs recommended under bridging-based ranking.

<b>Personalized to Left-Leaning Users</b>		
businessinsider.com	Americans have lost confidence in everything from organized religion to Congress, but their faith in unions is staying strong	Americans aren't feeling good about many institutions, especially the Supreme Court and presidency. But confidence in organized labor hasn't budged.
texastribune.org	Uvalde schools police Chief Pete Arredondo resigns from city council	In a letter to the city, Arredondo said he was stepping down from his elected position, citing a desire to "minimize further distractions."
thehill.com	Federal grand jury, SEC subpoena Trump's media company	A federal grand jury in Manhattan and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) have both subpoenaed former President Trump's media company, according to a SEC filing dated Friday. Digital World...
businessinsider.com	Expert on White House chiefs of staff says Mark Meadows 'absolutely owns' the title of 'worst' chief in history after ex-aide's damning testimony	The author Chris Whipple says that what Meadows and Trump did on January 6, 2021, makes the Nixon Watergate figures "look like choir boys."
businessinsider.com	Watergate prosecutor says slapping Trump with a charge for rebellion or insurrection could prevent him from ever holding office again	Jill Wine-Banks, a Watergate prosecutor, said convicting Trump of such a charge would be a "more important goal than jailing the former president."
businessinsider.com	A former federal prosecutor says Donald Trump will be indicted 'if we care about the survival of our democracy'	Ex-prosecutor Glenn Kirschner said there have been no criminal charges against Trump so far, but that "has to change" and Trump "will be indicted."
abcnews.go.com	Not prosecuting Trump for Jan. 6 would fuel a 'much graver threat,' Liz Cheney says	The DOJ shouldn't avoid prosecuting Trump in relation to the Jan. 6 Capitol attack if a prosecution is warranted, Rep. Liz Cheney said in an interview on "This Week"
thehill.com	Kinzinger says more witnesses have come forward after Hutchinson testimony	Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.), a member of the House select committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot, said on Sunday that new witnesses have come forward since Cassidy Hutchinson testi...
businessinsider.com	Jon Stewart says 'the Supreme Court is now the Fox News of justice' after the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade	I mean, there is no consistency, he said. "States can't regulate guns, but they can regulate [uteruses], you know?" abortion
truthout.org	"Crisis of Our Democracy": AOC Calls for Supreme Court Justices to Be Impeached	"The Supreme Court has dramatically overreached its authority," the lawmaker said.

Table 4: Top ten URLs recommended to left-leaning users under personalized ranking.

<b>Personalized to Right-Leaning Users</b>		
businessinsider.com	A Florida state board removed a pediatrician who advocated that children under 5 get the COVID-19 vaccine	Florida is the only state that has not ordered vaccines for kids under 5, and Gov. Ron DeSantis said vaccinating young children is not "appropriate."
businessinsider.com	Former Trump White House senior counselor Kellyanne Conway says Ron DeSantis has done a 'remarkable' job as Florida's governor	Conway told David Axelrod that DeSantis "has been really smart to focus on his own reelection" and "not get too involved with too many other races."
rumble.com	Justice Sotomayor Leaves Audience Stunned By Heaping Praise on Justice Clarence Thomas	Justice Sotomayor Leaves Audience Stunned By Heaping Praise on Justice Clarence Thomas
aflegal.org	America First Legal — Litigation Blitz: America First Legal Sues 11 Biden Admin Agencies for Records on Biden Appointees Advancing Radical, Woke Agenda	Washington, D.C. – Yesterday, America First Legal (“AFL”) sued the Biden Administration to uncover the political appointees installed across the federal government to advance its radical, “woke” agenda. Last July, AFL sent FOIA requests to the Departments of Commerce, Education, Energy, He...
abcnews.go.com	Supreme Court marshal asks officials in Maryland to prohibit picketing outside justices' homes	The high court just ended a divisive term, ruling on hot-button issues like abortion and gun rights.
theragingpatriot.net	Breaking: Arizona Governor Signs Bill Requiring Proof Of Citizenship To Vote, “Election Integrity Means...”	President Joe Biden waits before giving remarks on inflation and supply chain issues at the Port of Los Angeles, Friday, June 10, 2022, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci) “Arizonans will n...
dailytorch.com	Supreme Court ruling in West Virginia v. EPA eviscerates the administrative state	By Robert Romano The Supreme Court has concluded its 2021 term with another blockbuster ruling, this time in West Virginia v. EPA , that struck down the Environmental Protection Agency’s 2015 Clean Power Plan under the Obama administration that sought to regulate carbon emissions under the Clean A...
conservativebrief.com	The Walls Are Closing In On Schumer — Top Rep Says He Could Be Removed From Leadership After He Decided to Attack SCOTUS Justices Earlier This Year	This would rock D.C.
theragingpatriot.net	Breaking: Massive Lawsuit Has Just Been Filed Against Nancy Pelosi & The January 6th Committee	Getty Images Former White House Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows, is suing Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the January 6 committee. He filed a 43-page complaint to the U.S. District Court in Washington in Dec...
www.forbes.com	88% Of Americans Say U.S. Is On Wrong Track	President Biden now faces 58% disapproval.

Table 5: Top ten URLs recommended to right-leaning users under personalized ranking.